

1607/5345

A

PLAIN X  
ADDRESS, &c.

TO THE  
CHURCHES OF CHRIST,  
ON THE  
MUCH NEGLECTED DUTY  
OF  
MUTUAL EDIFICATION.

IN TWO LETTERS TO A FRIEND.

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BY A. W.

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WHEREFORE COMFORT YOURSELVES TOGETHER  
AND EDIFY ONE ANOTHER, EVEN AS ALSO YE  
DO. 1 THESS. V. II; BUT AS WE NOW DO NOT

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## ADVERTISEMENT.

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THESE Letters were not designed by the Author to be published, he hoped that some person more capable of such a work would have taken it up, and either have set the example, or pleaded the cause with more judgment than he is able to do; but in this he has failed—was therefore determined to expose it to public view, as Auctioneers do their goods, with all its faults, hoping it may induce some person to investigate the subject more fully than he has done, and perhaps fall in with his design, which is to promote the glory of God, and union and spirituality in the church.

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the subject more fully than  
I may induce some persons to  
consider, which goods, with all its faults,  
is to be published as a model  
to be followed - I have no intention  
to publish it as such; but in this  
case, I have no more to judge  
of than I have in the example  
of the world, which I have taken to  
be the standard of the nation, and  
I have no more to judge of than I  
have in the example of the nation,  
which I have taken to be the standard  
of the world.





DEAR SIR,

I FOUND peculiar pleasure in reading the circular letter from the last association of ministers at *St. Albans*, particularly in finding a practice recommended, which, if adopted, I have no doubt would greatly tend to promote the cause of true religion; I mean that of private christians, reading to, praying with, and exhorting their neighbours, as opportunity might offer; but not having heard any thing more of it, I fear there are some obstacles in the way, and perhaps I shall not be far from the truth, if I surmise that the fault lies in great and good men;—I mean ministers themselves, whom I highly venerate and esteem. I know the difficulties that lies in the way of a private individual, however warmly his heart might be engaged, to promote the glory of God, and his neighbour's good, to stand forth in this cause, unless countenanced by the pastor of the church of which he is a member!

I have, nevertheless, ventured to suggest a plan, which, if carried into effect, would, as I conceive, be a means of removing every bar now in the way of that prosperity of soul, which is necessary to qualify private Christians for attending to the practice recommended in the circular letter before referred to.

This plan I take the liberty to submit to your attentive consideration; hoping that, if

it meets your approbation, you will, as far as your influence may extend, give it your countenance and support, and that, if on the other hand, you should be of opinion, it is not sufficiently warranted by the scriptures I have quoted, you will have the goodness to point out wherein you think I have mistaken the sense of, or mis-applied them. In order to communicate my thoughts in as concise a manner as possible, I will first of all lay down my plan, and refer to some scriptures, which, in my opinion, favor and support it.

*Secondly*, Point out some of the benefits that may be expected to arise from the observance of it.

*Thirdly*, Endeavour to answer some of the objections commonly made against it.

*First*. The plan which I propose, in order to accomplish so desirable an end as that already named, is to appoint a weekly meeting for every Brother in the church, to exercise his gift, both in prayer and speaking, for the mutual edification of the church, under such regulations as the word doth furnish.

*1st*. The time of meeting should be the most convenient to the whole body, 1 Cor. xiv. 23. "when the whole church is come together;" this may be more convenient one time than another.

*2ndly*. The time allotted for one person to speak, should be regulated by the number that is to speak, [see verse 30th.] "If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace."

If this was a fit regulation in the days of inspiration, it cannot be less so now, in order that no one should engross so much of the time as to prevent another speaking.

*3dly.* The gift thus exercised should be such as the church finds upon trial to be for edification, 26th verse, "Let all things be done to edifying." Verse 29. "Let the others judge." Those that are authorised to judge must also determine.

*4thly.* No one should be confined to any particular subject, verse 26. "One hath a Psalm, another a Doctrine, &c." The mode of giving a text for such an exercise as this, often proves hurtful, and occasions much repetition.

*Lastly.* This should be attended to for mutual edification. I do not see any other object held up in the word: I mean it should not be with a view to find out gifts for the ministry. This, indeed, lays the foundation for one of the objections, that I shall by and by attempt to answer, and I think the whole exercise would be much more useful, if such a thought was entirely banished from the minds of all that speak. If the great Head of the Church sees fit to point out his ministers in this way, I shall rejoice; but I believe it is the church's duty to attend to this mode of edification, whether ever that be the case or not.

*1st.* Because it was the way the church worshiped God in the apostles' days, as appears from the whole of the chapter referred

to already, where it is said, "the whole church came together into one place."

2dly. This will further appear, from the apostles regulating and correcting some disorders that were among them; which amounts to a full proof of his approbation of the thing itself. If we take occasion from hence, to argue against this practice as some have done, we may as well deny the use of the Lord's Supper, because the apostle found it necessary to correct some abuses, in the manner of their attendance upon that ordinance. If difficulties arise in this exercise, yet surely we are not warranted to lay it aside, to avoid them; but rather attend to the rules laid down to prevent or remove them.

3dly. We have the apostle's opinion plainly laid down, so that words cannot make it plainer: "ye may all prophesy one by one." I know some will object and say, this is only a permission, it is not a command. I answer, it cannot be a command without some limitation, unless all were gifted for it, which is not the case; nevertheless, it does amount to a command to all that are any way qualified for such work. 1 Cor. xii. 7. "The manifestation of the spirit is given to every man to profit withall;" and if it were only a permission, who is that man or set of men, that can hold themselves guiltless in denying their brethren a privilege which the apostle allows and approves.

But, 4thly, we have the apostle's command, or that which is equal to it, in the 14th chapter,



ter, verse 12, "even so ye, for as much as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the Church." Where he prefers prophesying, to speaking with tongues: compared with verse 29, "wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy;" and, in verse 27, he saith, "if any man thinks himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge, that the things that I write unto you, are the commandments of the Lord;" implying, that if he did not acknowledge this, he was not so wise and spiritual as a prophet should be: but I know there are some who will get over all this, by telling us, that the word prophecy, means predicting future events, which in this day we have no right to expect. I shall only say, I cannot think any person who reads the New Testament with attention, can be so ignorant of its use and meaning in this chapter, and many other places, however they may wish to impose such a sense upon others.

Again, some object and say, "In the Apostles' days, there were extraordinary Gifts in the Church, and therefore the Apostle means to regulate the use and exercise of those gifts for the time then present." I am happy to answer, that the ordinary gifts of the spirit which remain in use unto this day, are rated much higher by the apostle, than those miraculous gifts, and placed in order before them, 1 Cor. xii. 29, where he places Prophets and Teachers next to the Apostles, and these



these are the gifts the apostle commends in his Epistle to the Romans, chap. xv. 14, where he says, "and I myself also am persuaded of you, my brethren, that ye also are full of all goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another." And, 1 *Thess.* v. 11. "wherefore, comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do:" and *Heb.* iii. 13. "Exhort one another daily," &c. From these passages, and more that I might mention, I conclude, that the Apostle's directions to the Corinthians are still binding upon the Church; but now I shall mention some of the benefits we may hope to derive, from an attendance upon this duty. As

*First.* It will operate as a powerful motive to search the scriptures. I know there are other and very weighty motives to induce us to attend to this duty, but perhaps there are none more sensibly felt than this, the looking forward to a time, when we are expected to say something from the word. I know the force of this motive by experience, and can adduce many living witnesses who will attest the same, and I think I may appeal to the experience of every gospel minister for the truth of this observation. I have heard some talk of taking a passage of scripture every morning, to meditate upon all the day; happy for them that can do it; but I have often found (and I think I am not alone) that very trifling incidents will put the subject quite out of the mind.

*Secondly.*

*Secondly.* This Exercise would very much tend to increase the Gifts of the Church, and render its members more apt and ready on all suitable occasions, to speak a word for God and truth, in all their connections and intercourse with mankind, as well as in the church, and enable some to extend their usefulness to their neighbours, in the way recommended in the before-mentioned circular letter. It is generally acknowledged, that the more any person is exercised in any art, the more expert he is; and surely it will hold good in this case.

*Thirdly.* This exercise doth not only induce a person to read and study the scriptures, and render it more easy and pleasant for him to speak on divine subjects, but it tends to the edification and comfort both of himself and the Church. He that communicates wisdom, increases in wisdom himself. This is what the Apostle gives as a reason why this duty should be attended to. Ye may all prophesy, that *all* may learn, and that *all* may be comforted.

*First.* It tends very much to the edification of the person himself who speaks, by inducing him to search and study the scriptures, and compare one passage with another, and so aiming to form a just idea of them, and what is deducible from them; he is better prepared to attend to the ministry of the word, and his mind is open to receive it. He hears, as it were, with new ears, and  
trea-

treasures up a double portion of it in his own mind to what he did before. Again, it tends to his own edification, in that the subject he speaks upon, is more fixed and impressed upon his own heart; moreover, he has oftentimes a happy enlargement in speaking, beyond all the thoughts he had found in meditation. When a person has put his thoughts into words, and communicated them to others, there is mostly a clearer view and a more abiding sense of them upon himself. Hence, it has often been profitable to repeat what we can recollect of a sermon.

Again, there is a very important advantage derived to the speaker himself; as it is a very powerful *inducement to live near to God*. He finds it absolutely necessary to watch and pray, and seek constant help from the Spirit of God, lest he should be bewildered, and left of God, in this exercise, and so be ashamed before his brethren. A person that only attends public worship on a Lord's Day, may be as dead almost as the seat he sits upon, and yet go on, because it is not discovered: he may live in some sin, indulge evil passions, and yet appear to be a very good member; but the person who attends upon such exercises as these, cannot indulge himself in any known sin, *for it will be detected*. Oh! that this one advantage might have its due weight upon all those who oppose this kind of exercise! Farther,  
this

this does certainly tend to the edification of the Church, even those that do not take part in the exercise.

I do not mean to say that the Church in general is more edified by these feeble gifts, than they are by their ministers; but I mean, that in the Church there is in general such a variety of different capacities, dispositions, situations and conditions, *that no one gift is fully competent to instruct and edify them all*; and it appears to me that the great Head of the Church never intended it should. Therefore he hath bestowed different gifts upon different men, as may be seen, 1 Cor. xii. 4, and 5, and on to 11, and 28, 29, and 30; indeed, the whole chapter abundantly shews that all these gifts never dwelt in one man; for the Church is represented by the very beautiful and instructive emblem of a body composed of various members, which metaphor appears to me to be equally applicable to the gifts, as to the capacity of those that are to be edified by those gifts; and we may easily point out as great difference in the one as in the other. I need not attempt to point out what distinguishes the head from the foot, or the eye from the ear, but only say for illustration, there is strong and weak, there is wise and simple, babes and old men, &c. We next suppose there is a good man placed over a church, he is very zealous, and labours for the conversion of sinners; indeed, his preaching is

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well



well adapted to awaken sinners, and he is successful in his labour, but the old experienced Christian is not edified: he says, this is all milk, I want some solid food. And even those that are called under this good man, are obliged to go somewhere else for building up. Again, we suppose another church has for their pastor, a person of the first abilities, such a one as the late Dr. Gill, for instance; and he soars aloft, quite in the clouds, or in Ezekiel's vision, to the admiration of the old experienced Christians, whilst it may be, two-thirds of the people lay withering at his feet and have nothing to eat; and yet extol the preacher, because so many great and good men admire him! Thus they live upon popular opinion till almost starved, and often cry out, this minister is a great and good man, but he is a heavy preacher. Of these things I could produce evidences in abundance, were it necessary, which I think it is not; but it shews me the necessity of a variety of gifts being employed in the Church; and I am persuaded, that the simple, plain, and unembellished language of many private Christians would be much blessed to the weaker part of the church. Nay, I have known instances where the very same ideas have been conveyed in a homely stile, and owned of the Lord for good, which, when dressed up in fine language, by a systematical preacher, have been of no use, not being under-



understood by the hearers. "Let, therefore, *all* prophecy, that *all* may learn, and *all* be comforted." Edifying and comfort commonly go together. Some, indeed, despise this homely way of teaching one another. I was lately told by a brother, of one minister that called upon another, who was at that time employed in attending such a meeting among the members of his church, when it was over, the visitor asked the other How he could sit to hear such nonsense? I own there are some who cannot speak for edification, and it is certainly a fault in those that lead to call upon them; and if such will push themselves forward, the Church should interfere; but I think I may say without breach of charity, the person who made that speech was proud of his own gifts, and therefore it is no wonder if he should be despised, and perhaps at the same time, he may blame his hearers instead of himself, because *he* is not made useful. If he had been duly sensible that the gifts he possessed were the effect of the free mercy of God; not bestowed upon him for any worthiness of his, but in order that he should occupy the same in God's own way and for his glory, he would have found some softer words, even admitting that there was impropriety in the person then speaking; but I know it is common for those that have a high opinion of their own abilities to despise others; this cannot be exercising proper care over

the weaker members of the body, according to the Apostle's advice. Some, indeed, tell us, we should always covet the best gifts, intimating thereby, that the best gift should always be employed in every meeting. But sure this would not answer their purpose; if so, what must become of nine-tenths of those that are public preachers, where many of them are together, as is the case at our monthly meetings. But, perhaps, one of the greatest objections is grounded on a supposition, that it tends to lessen the *importance of the ministerial character*, while the members feel an increasing attachment to some of those brethren that have been useful to them, it is thought their esteem must be less for their pastor. I grant there are some persons weak enough to caress a brother that has dropt any word that the Lord sees fit to own for good, but it is hard to say which affords the greatest proof of weakness, the person that does so, or the pastor that is offended at it. It would be well, if all personal commendations were banished from the church of Christ. What has any man that he has not received? Let every man think soberly of himself, is the doctrine the Apostle taught. Why then should we bestow praise upon men? The Apostle charges Timothy, "not to prefer one before another," and to do nothing by partiality; and should there be a growing esteem for each other, it cannot surely detract at all from

from the pastor; this may be illustrated by figures, 999999999 you see the highest number is just the same, where all the rest are significant figures, as where the rest are all cyphers; and it will be found wherever a society rises higher in any excellency, the person that presides over them receives additional honor. There are some in the ministry, who, by their preaching and manner of behaviour, evidently require a great deal of homage, and they also have it: But it is for the most part forced. Again, there are others who require no homage at all, and they receive an hundred fold true, hearty, and sincere affection. What is it makes the difference? The one is like a man with a large wax candle in his hand, in a room with more men, who have all little candles, and he rises up and puts out all the little candles, that his own may shine the more conspicuous. The other is a humble, generous soul, who rejoices that there are so many, though little lights, to aid and assist him, and he attends to his work with double alacrity and delight. This is the man that is justly esteemed. For a man to seek his own honor is not good, and however he may contend for it, upon the ground of his office, character, &c. wherever and however it appears, it will not fail to create disgust; and I am persuaded there are some who very much hinder their own usefulness by discovering such a temper and spirit in

their preaching and conversation! There are examples of wise and holy men that would serve to illustrate this subject, but I forbear. It is not my object to bring charges, or fix blame upon any person; but to remove, if possible, an evil that exists in the Church; and so make way for its enlargement and prosperity. Another objection that is often made to this kind of exercise, is this, that it affords an opportunity for weak persons to push themselves forward into the work of ministry, and thereby occasions much trouble in the Church. This, I believe, is sometimes the case; but the evil might be removed, by attending to the plan already laid down; no person should be allowed to continue speaking but such as are found to edify the Church; and the spirit of the Prophets is subject to the Prophets: but I add, this evil and another that I shall mention, arises from a fault in the system that now prevails; I mean the mode of exercising the gifts that are in the church, with this express design, to find out such as may be fit for the ministry. But few churches allow such an exercise on any other account, and herein, I think, is utterly a fault! I know not of any authority in the word for such a practice; neither command, direction, or example. Strange to me, that the Churches will not let the Lord do his own work, but put their finger to it without his leave, Both this mode of exercising them, and what is denominated calling



ling or appointing them to the ministry, appears to me entirely of human invention, and has no authority, that I can find in all the New Testament. It is generally acknowledged, that it is the Lord's work to call his ministers, but man hath taken it out of his hands, and therefore it is, that there are so many in the work evidently of man's calling, and not the Lord's. Where I ask, did Jesus or his apostles give power to any church to denominate a person a minister of Christ, and send him out to preach the gospel? If, indeed, a church invite a person to minister to them, then he is entitled to that name. This is what lays the foundation for the very evil complained of. There being already so many weak persons in the ministry, more weak ones try for it, and perhaps are very much offended if they are not approved! whereas, if the sole object of this exercise was mutual edification, such persons would not be so troublesome in pushing themselves forward.

But there is another evil annexed to this system, and that is, it shuts the mouths of those that would be useful. There are many brethren that would come forward and exercise their gift for mutual comfort and edification; *who cannot dare to do it, when it is understood that the object is to find out ministers;* and thereby the church is deprived of one great means of *growth and prosperity*. The idea of a person proposing himself in this very case is disgusting, unless there be extraordinary



many abilities to support it. What, do I think that I am fit for the ministry. No, nor would the approbation of thousands produce such a thought in me; nay, I should blush before my brethren, if I believed that they thought I had such an opinion of myself. This, I believe, hath shut up many gifts that would have been useful; and yet it is allowed, that a person's desire to this work has great weight; for my part, I think but little of such desires. I suppose that there are but few young men but feel something of this when they are first brought into an acquaintance with the gospel, and the pleasures of true religion; at least, I can answer for one; but what was it worth, the best I can say of it is, it was the sincere desire of a novice in the things of God! Yet, perhaps, this is all that some persons have, whereby to determine their call to the work. I look upon such to be self-made, or at least men-made ministers, and not called of God, as they all should be. But you will say, how then are we to find out gifts to supply different churches? I answer, go in the path of duty, exercise *them all* in the church, and the Lord will point them out, whom he has designed for public work, by enlarging their minds, and assisting them to utter knowledge clearly. Again, it will be asked, How are these to be known, so as to become eligible to preach in other churches? I answer, if the Church perceive a gift in any brother, that, in their judgment,

is

is fit for public work, let them exercise that brother occasionally, in public amongst themselves, and that will make him known; and when any church is in need of help, whether occasional or stated, let them enquire of their sister churches, and when they hear of one that is judged elligible, let them invite him to minister to them. This appears to me, a call of God to preach the gospel; and not the voice of his brethren where he stands a member. But I know it will be asked, how doth it appear that such invitations are the voice of God, seeing that some churches invite a great many, and scarce approve of any. I answer, this would not so often occur, if my plan was carried into effect; but in the present very defective system, there are many called ministers, that the most candid Christians can hardly suppose, were ever called of God to such a work. Add to this, the custom that now prevails in the churches, that they must set up a person who has been deemed a minister in the common way, whether they think he will profit them or not. Many a church has been put to the blush by this practice, and yet have not power to leave it off. No wonder if this should not appear to be the voice of God. Again, where this is not the case, it must be allowed that even the true servants of Christ are not alike useful in every place. He that orders the clouds where to drop the rain, superintends these things.

Again,

Again, it sometimes happens, that the person invited doth not like the situation, or the people that invite him; perhaps, they are too poor; I wish there was not a single instance to be found that would justify this remark. Notwithstanding this, wherever a people that fears God, and seeks to him by prayer for a minister, and for the Lord to come with his servant, I think that every true servant of Christ will consider it as their master's call, and indeed I know of no other call but this. There are many other objections, but I believe what I have named are the principal, and all of them appear to me to arise from, and favour of, the things that be of men, and not the things that be of God. I will mention a few more. One is this, some persons do not like to attend these meetings, because they say they cannot take part in them. This may in a sense be true, but I have found, by enquiry, that it was not because they could not take any part, but because they *could not excel!* May I not say without breach of charity, that envy and pride have shut their mouths? Another will say, he has not time to search the scriptures, and leaves that to ministers, whose business it is to examine the word. "The idle soul shall suffer hunger!" But I suppose the most prevalent objection amongst the people is, because it is not countenanced by their ministers! There are some ministers where the Church has thought fit to have something

thing of this kind, who will not give their attendance, but even throw cold water upon it, speak very slightly of it; and indeed they must do so to be consistent. Is not this to despise prophesying? Is not this quenching the spirit? If it is not, I know not what is: and how ministers can answer it to God and their own consciences, I know not; that when they have exercised a gift for a length of time, and upon the whole do not think him fit for public work, that then he must be silenced, suppressed, and wholly laid aside as useless! If this is not a sinful resisting of the spirit of God, then I do not know any action of a depraved creature that ought to be so called! If the great Master of gifts was to call such a person to account for the use of his talent, he would not need to say, "he had hid it in a napkin;" he would find some other reply which I forbear to mention. I will not say this is beating the servants, *Luke xii. 45*, but I will say, it is exercising that dominion over them, which the great Head of the Church never allowed, no not to his Apostles! It has been said, that to judge fairly of another's conduct, we should suppose ourselves as far as we can, in his circumstances. I will take the liberty for a moment to consider myself a pastor of a church, and tell you what my feelings would be in the last mentioned case. My brethren think it right to meet together for prayer, and attempt to edify



edify one another; they pray earnestly for me, that the Lord would bless me, and increase my usefulness; they pray for one another, that the Lord would build them up, and as a proof that they are sincere, they make use of those means that God has appointed, to promote each other's growth in grace, but I think very little of these means, and therefore excuse myself; perhaps it would be too much fatigue for me, or it would infringe upon my time for study, or my Christian visits, or it may be some other engagement that has myself for its object, and not the cause of God. How must I feel? If I was in my study, I should think of my brethren and what they are now doing, instead of the subject before me. Perhaps I should think of Paul's words to Timothy, "be instant in season and out of season," or the words of the Psalmist, "the Lord loveth the gates of Zion, more than all the dwellings of Jacob," or the words of our Lord, "wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Such would be the reproofs of conscience, that I should do little more than sit down and sigh over my own folly. If I was on a visit, if the question should be asked, what are the best evidences of growth in grace? I should blush to give an answer; and when I am to preach the word, I must chuse out a subject, where I could pass over spirituality and heavenly mind-



mindedness; how could I inforce those  
 exhortations that tend to increafe mutual  
 joy and love among God's people? I must  
 not address those exhortations of St. Paul's,  
 which have been already mentioned to my  
 hearers, nor say a word about "assembling  
 ourselves together," &c. Thus I must la-  
 bour hard to lengthen out my subject, and  
 leave no room for reflection nor application,  
 lest I should reprove myself! Let me offer  
 one or two arguments more upon this sub-  
 ject before I close. Is it not the wish of  
 every gospel minister, that his hearers  
 should understand him, when he is preach-  
 ing the word? I think I may justly say this  
 kind of exercise with prayer, is the best  
 means that ever was afforded to man, to  
 open his mind to receive the knowledge  
 of the truth. What a pity that it should be  
 withheld from him. Again, what a beau-  
 tiful sight must it be, to see the elder, or pas-  
 tor of a church sit at the head of the table;  
 next to him the deacons; then the elder bre-  
 thren; after that the younger, all assemble  
 in order to edify one another. Each one  
 esteeming another better than himself, gladly  
 offering any word in his power, that may  
 tend to exalt the Redeemer's name, and  
 promote love and harmony in the church.  
 This, I think, is the most glorious sight,  
 (except the celebration of the Lord's Sup-  
 per) that ever men or angels beheld here  
 below, since the days of inspiration ceased!

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And

And where is the man that can despise such a sight? what must his heart be, and where is the minister that is so full of wisdom that he cannot receive any increase by attending on such exercises as these, or so spiritual that he does not need to mingle his spark with others, to kindle a flame of heavenly fire? Here every member appears in his place, and the pastor upon his highest seat of honor, (except as before excepted.)

Thus I have given you in the best manner I can, the outlines of this important subject, according as it appears to me. I can truly say, I am not contending for an opinion. Had this been all I should not have taken this pains, I view it in a very important light, and therefore put it into your hands, hoping that you will support the thing itself, whether you approve of my arguments or not. Nor would it satisfy me, to have one or two churches fall in with these ideas. I wish for a more extensive benefit, and however it may be rejected and despised now, I am persuaded, when there is a larger out pouring of the spirit, the Church will be restored to the ancient mode of worship, as in the Apostle's days!

*I remain, dear sir,*

*Your's, affectionately,*

March 20,

AARON WEST.

1797.

DEAR

## LETTER II.

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DEAR SIR,

**I** HAVE taken the liberty to lay before you a few thoughts more upon the important subject of Church Order, particularly that part of it which respects the exercise of gifts. In my last, I gave you my plan, which I conceive to come very near the original practice of the Church, in the Apostles' days. I then considered the chief objectors to be the ministers; but I have now to add, the Deacons, and some of the Elder Brethren. Whether they are influenced by the ministers, or not, I shall not determine; but it is astonishing to me, that men of knowledge and experience, should be so alarmed at my proposal, as if the Church was like to be overturned, and all religion destroyed; whilst they bring forward no argument to support their practice, or their fears, but custom. That seems to bear all down before it, so that I might as

well think of moving St. Paul's cathedral, by setting my shoulder against it, as move this great mountain; however, I intend to have another push at it, if I die in the attempt, as Sampson did with the Philistines! The subject appears to me so important, that I cannot rest till I have tried every means in my power to gain the point; and whilst I read and hear so many pleasing accounts from different parts of the country, of the zeal and ardour with which good men are stirred up in the cause of religion; I flatter myself the time is not far distant, when this method of improvement will be adopted, at least in the country, where the zeal of ministers and people seem to be an hundred fold more than it is in this place! Many plans have been formed, and I have no doubt with a pious design; and it seems to me, there wants only this one to make the work complete. Two plans, I have heard, were proposed in Hampshire, which I am persuaded are inadequate, and will fail of their design: the one is to establish schools to instruct young men; the other is to set up conference meetings in the churches, for the exercising of the gifts that are in them. Both these are defective; the first is leaning to the old system, that has long been in use to little purpose, and defeats its own design, by prompting young persons to set themselves up above their brethren, and cherish that self-importance which



which is so pleasing to human nature, and so fatal to the cause of religion. The other of these plans is also very defective, because it is chiefly carried on by young men, whose aim and study frequently appear to be, more to set off their manner of speaking than the matter of it; or in other words, to recommend themselves, rather than edify their brethren: whereas, if what is called a regular church, was to assemble together, after the plan laid down in my former letter; the Pastor, the Deacons, and Elder Brethren, all take part in the exercise, and deliver a short sentence upon some part of the word, or some part of experience, or some special providence, without aiming at any thing like the public ministry, whilst the younger brethren sit round in silence, as becomes youth, till by degrees they are enabled to come forward, and join the elder with modesty and humility, in that delightful work of edifying one another, as the Church in their wisdom may see fit to encourage them; I cannot help thinking this would be the best school for young gifts, and do more real good to the cause of religion, than all the academies that are in the world! Were these attended to, I am persuaded that the inland missionary society might spare more than half their expences; indeed, very little more would be needful than that of providing places to worship in. It is allowed on all hands that it is not

learned men that make the best missionaries, nor is it gentlemen! And we all know, that as soon as a youth is sent to one of these academies, he immediately commences *gentleman*, and is so looked upon, by those poor people to whom afterwards he preaches. Such an idea, however, is very unfavourable to the work of a missionary. I would not be understood by this, to speak against learning, this is not my meaning, but I consider this mode of making ministers, to be going before hand with God. It is like beginning to build the top of the house, before the foundation is properly secured. Learning is certainly good in its place, but let it not be used as a ladder to ascend the ministerial car. How many men, eminent for learning and piety in this and the last ages, have declared, all their learning never helped them to one truly spiritual idea in God's word! Nay, they have confessed that the study of it is unfriendly to spirituality; and, on the other hand, how many great and learned men have we now in the Church, who were not so when they were called to the ministry; and yet never went to an academy to gain it! I know some will object and say, "those young men that go for learning, are judged of the Church to which they belong, to be gifted for the ministry *before* they are sent." I answer, how is it then, that so many in after times appear not to be sent of God? Doth not this prove the Churches to be fal-

lible in this matter, and that this system is not of God? And if a Church send those whom God never sent, will not the crime be as great as in those that go without being sent by a Church? Farther, I suppose it will be found, upon enquiry, that those who are thus sent for the most part, first considered themselves as gifted for it, and take great pains to gain the same opinion from others. Now, this is what I object to here: those young persons cannot be proper judges of the great work of the ministry, and therefore not of the qualifications necessary for it. And how then can their motives be pure? But I leave this part of the subject, when I have given you this one reflection upon it. (If the times with the Church were such as they have been in this country about a century ago, young men would not be so fond of going to an academy and spending seven years in preparing themselves to be ministers; perhaps such a sifting time may come again, and rouse the Church out of these customs and formalities. Then such persons will be content to stay till the Lord send them out himself.) But I return to my subject; I have endeavoured in my former Letter to point out the utility and propriety of such an exercise being attended to by the Church, *as a Church*, and not in little societies only; for if it is good for Christians as such, surely it is good for the Church of God, that is made up of Christians. This  
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I have endeavoured to shew, from the practice of the Apostles, and primitive Churches, which I shall not repeat, but offer a few arguments more, from the several descriptions given of the Church of God in the word.

*First.* A building house, or temple of God, 1 *Cor.* iii. 9, "ye are God's building." 1 *Tim.* iii. 15, "the house of God, the pillar and ground of truth." 1 *Cor.* iii. 16, "know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" Again, 2 *Cor.* vi. 16, "ye are the temple of the living God, &c." 2d. *Eph.* 21 and 22, "in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth into an holy temple in the Lord, in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." From the whole of which it doth appear to me, that as in a building literally, when it is fitly framed, there should be a union and proportion in every part, so that all may contribute to the strength or beauty of the building; and is not this strictly true of the spiritual building of which I am speaking? There are pillars, but do those who are so accounted in our Churches bear up the weaker part of the building? Perhaps in an outward sense they may help to support the cause with their riches; but surely this is not all that is intended in the word. I know some will object and say, "it is God's work to build up his Church, and that he doth it by the ministry of the word." It is



is true, but I also read, that we are to be "workers together." (See the *Epistle of Jude*, ver. 20.) "but ye beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost; keep yourselves in the love of God." *Col. ii. 2.* the apostle speaks of the Church being "knit together in love," and (verse 7) "rooted and built up in him," that is in Christ, and "established in the faith as ye have been taught, and abounding therein with thanksgiving." Do not these and many more scriptures imply that the members of a Gospel Church should take an active part in edifying one another? What was the order the Apostle mentions in the 5th verse of the last cited chapter, that gave him so much joy, to which he subjoins an exhortation to persevere in the same? It could not be merely the decency in which they sat to hear their minister preach the word; this would not have evinced the steadfastness of their faith in Christ; but their exhorting, instructing, and comforting each other would stablish and build them up; and this was matter of joy to him. The Apostle Peter tells us, that this building is made up of lively stones, *1 Pet. ii. 5.* "ye also as lively stones are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices." And, again, verse 9, "ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should shew forth the praises of him that hath

hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." How do Christians do this? The Apostle Paul tells us, *Coll. iii. 16.* "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another, in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord; thus do Christians build whilst they are built, and work whilst they are wrought upon; here we see believers are not only called lively stones, but a royal priesthood; agreeable to the ancient promises, *Isa. lxi. 6*, which is generally understood of Gospel times; here the character of a priest is given to believers in Christ; but if a private Christian should attempt to exhort or instruct his brethren, according to the modern law of Churches, he must be censured as one that invades the priests' offices! How opposite is this to the Spirit of our Lord, who, when the disciples told him of one that cast out devils in his name, and yet followed not with them, and they forbade him, our blessed Lord said, "forbid him not, for they that are not against us are for us." *Mark. ix. 38.* Where then is that beautiful structure, that I have seen in the word of God! Alas! I am obliged to lament after it, as Israel did after the ark when it was in captivity! A Church, according to its present form, seems to me no more to resemble the building that the word of God speaks of, than a heap of stones shot  
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down from a pavior's cart, resembles a well built house ! For instance, this law in a Church, that members may read, sing, and pray, but must not comment upon what they read, puts me in mind of Saul's oath, by which he troubled Israel in binding them not to eat ; and Jonathan's answer is as applicable to those law makers as it was to his father ! And the effect is to be lamented as it is there ! For if the people had eaten freely, would there not have been a much greater slaughter of the Philistines, 1 *Sam.* xiv. 30. Whence should such a law as this arise ? It never came from the blessed Saviour. There is not a word recorded of him, nor an action of his life that favors such a sentiment ! But I leave this metaphor, and attend to one of similar import. The Church is represented as a body, composed of various members; 1 *Cor.* xii. throughout ; this chapter is so full to the purpose, and so plain that it needs no comment. Indeed, it would require more skill, in my opinion, to gloss it over, and put a mystical sense upon it, than to understand it in its own original simplicity ; strange it is to me, that a subject so important and so plain, could be so long neglected, where the union, communion, and intercourse of members, one with another, is so evidently set forth ; will any body attempt to explain this, as only having to do with the bodies of men in their outward condition ; afflictions,

ons, poverty, &c.? This must be to limit and eclipse the glory of a gospel Church ! The Apostle says, look not every man to his own things, but also to the things of others, as if he had said, if you are happy and comfortable in your own soul, let others know upon what grounds you are so, that they may rejoice with you. The Lepers, *2 Kings*, vii. 9. may teach us the meaning of the Apostle here. They said one to another, "we do not well, this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace, &c. Let us go and tell the king's household." But I will mention two passages more, and then conclude this letter. *Col.* ii. 19, "and not holding the Head, that is Christ, from which all the bodily joints and bands having nourishment, ministered and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God." Here we see how the body is knit together, and every part nourishes each other, to the growth of the whole. Again, *Ephe.* iv. 16, "From whom (that is from Christ) the whole body fitly joined together and compacted, by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body, unto the edifying itself in love." I shall make no comment upon this myself, but give you the sentiments of a learned expositor in the Church of England, in his own words ; he says, " Is there a supply of nourishment from one member to another, according



according to the measure of every part in the natural body? So is there a supply from head to members, in the mystical body; and from one mystical member to another: one is apt to teach, another ready to comfort, a third able to convince, a fourth willing to exhort, a fifth to advise and counsel; and all these, and every one of these, contributing all they can to the welfare of the whole. "This (he says) is happy for the body, when they so do," and I think so too; and consider the want of it a matter of great affliction to the Church, and of blame to some persons in it, and if I did not know something of the power and influence of education and custom, I should be very severe upon some, who now oppose this means of spiritual growth and increase in the Church. Just now I referred you to the building, and behold it was lost!" The draught of it indeed is fair enough in the word, but the house is gone! perhaps Solomon can tell us what is become of it, *Ecl. x. 18.* "By much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands, the house drop-peth through;" and here I have referred you to the body, but where shall we look for it? The figure, indeed, is beautiful, but we cannot realize it! It is all disjointed, bone severed from his bone, like as in Eze-kial's vision, only with this difference, there is life in them, they are not dry bones, and yet they are not compact together: Per-  
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haps more fully described by the field of battle; where many lie bleeding of their wounds, some with the loss of one member, some of another. There are, indeed, some officers left, and a few rank and file, but they are engaged in battle, and cannot attend to the case of the wounded, notwithstanding it is so urgent and pitiable!

But now I propose to close this subject for the present, when I have stated a few reflections upon it, and laid down some probable reasons why it is not attended to in the Churches. When I reflect upon this subject, I am led to enquire with some degree of surprise, what can be the real grounds of objection? Is it because it is not clearly enough revealed? I think this cannot be, but if it should, let them set aside the sense that I have entertained of all the scriptures referred to in this Letter, and then prove the negative from the word of God, that it is not the duty of a Church to assemble together for mutual edification; and if they do this, I will give it up; but if this cannot be done, then those that oppose it must be considered by me, at least, as resisters of the Holy Ghost, and quenchers of the Spirit of God! If half the study and ingenuity was employed in investigating this subject, as there is in some other points of order, I presume it would soon appear that the scriptures are clear enough upon this head; and, therefore, I enquire again, is it because there is no  
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good arises from it? I answer, the experience of many good men will contradict this sentiment, and how can those who have never tried, judge in this case? Again, is it because there has any real evil taken place in consequence of this exercise? I have heard of many dreadful things arising out of a conference meeting; though with me the report wants evidence; and I fix the blame upon the ill management of it, rather than the exercise itself: but was it true, the exercise that I contend for was never practised in those places. Again, is it because it tends to lessen any of the dignified characters in the Church? This I have spoken to before, and remain still in the same mind. Is it because the Churches are content with low attainments, and are not concerned about growth and increase in spiritual things? I will not say this is the case in general, but I am persuaded it is true of many individuals. They will not give themselves the trouble to investigate the subject, thinking such a close application to divine things impracticable; and therefore give it up. And here let me give one caution to ruling men; it is well known that in a Church there are many who, on such a subject as this, have no opinion of their own, but look up to their Leaders; this shews the necessity of great watchfulness and circumspection in those that go before, lest they lead others astray. *Isa. ix. 16.* "The leaders of this people cause

them to err." Again, perhaps some object, merely because they have been accustomed to do without it, and to look upon it as an innovation. The great body of dissenters seem to hold it as superfluous; and so contentedly neglect it. I remember to have heard some time ago, that there was a motion made in the House of Commons, to enquire into the original constitution of the country, and examine what innovations had been made: a practice this, well worthy the imitation of a gospel Church at this time. If we were once to hit upon the time and circumstances of the Church, when these oppressive laws and restrictions took place, we should be better able to judge of their nature and tendency. And from what little I know of history, it appears to me, that these things took place about the end of the third century; when the Church was delivered from dreadful persecutions, and defended by the civil power; when the enemy saw that he could no more destroy the saints of God, he poured out of his mouth a flood of errors and superstitions, and made religion a trade, fixed livings upon the ministers, and that made them jealous over the gift of private Christians. Hence, the use of schools, and the increase of power among the bishops, till the Church was brought into bondage; and thus it hath remained ever since, in a greater or less degree: now what astonishes me is this, that many wise and  
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pious men in the present day can see this, and detest the errors and evils of a national religion, and yet cannot see how the same thing cleaves to themselves! It looks as if the great men in the Church had copied after the world. It is very observable, that political rulers aim in almost all they do, to render the private character a mere cypher, and this seems to me, the plan of the governors in Churches; and, likewise, in this, there is also a great conformity to the world. I have no doubt; but if the plan I have laid down had been formed by some popular character, or even by the *honored deacons*, it would have been applauded as excellent by some persons, who now cannot bear it. I will mention two passages more out of the Scriptures, and then conclude; *Heb. iii. 12*, and *13*. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God." Here what is the object of caution an evil heart, declining or departing from God. To whom was it directed? The holy Brethren. *Ver. 1*. "On whom was this watchfulness to be exercised? Their Brethren." In what manner were they to attend to this duty? By exhorting one another daily. The reason why it should be so constantly attended to, "lest any be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin—chap, x. 24, and 25. And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling

assembling ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching; this is nearly of the same import as the last mentioned passage: the object to be obtained, is love and good works, the opposite to the evil heart there spoken of. Instead of "take heed," he says, "consider one another," the means to be used is the same, exhorting one another; the object held up to enforce the duty differs a little; *where* it was the danger of being hardened in sin, and *here* it is, the consideration of the day of judgement being at hand, or the day of visitation upon the people of the Jews. But here is one thing that was not in the other place. We learn here, that the Church was to assemble together for this purpose, and not spend their time in going from house to house. I will give you the sentiments of a pious expositor of the last age, upon the 24th verse. "This consideration (he says,) respects the gifts; the graces; the temptations; the dangers of one another; and is the foundation of all those mutual duties, of warning, exhorting, and admonishing one another. Duties, (he says,) God knows, ~~is~~ generally lost amongst us, and with them is the glory of the Christian religion departed from us;" and he urges the necessity of these exhortations, to preserve Christians in their professions. Now, what must we think of our ministers in the present

sent day? Do they not know what the holy Spirit means in those scriptures, or do they shut their eyes because they do not like it? and what must we think of the bulk of our Churches? Are they content to follow their leaders implicitly without searching the word of God, to see if these things be so or not? Be very scrupulous upon some particular points, merely of an external nature, and pass over those important duties of moral obligation; for, by our Lord, this is reckoned next to the commandment of loving the Lord our God, and like unto it, how can we say we love our neighbour as ourselves, and do not acquaint ourselves with their situation? Our Lord has illustrated this love to our neighbour, by the parable of the good Samaritan, *Luke x.* and says to the lawyer, "go and do thou likewise. And how can we call Christ Lord, and do not the things that he saith," unless we suppose that all this benevolence extends only to outward things, which I think cannot be admitted. Before I conclude this letter, will give you two or three sentences out of a Sermon preached to a society of young men, who used to assemble for mutual edification in the Meeting-house, *Maze Pond*, by Mr. *Benjamin Wallin*, late pastor of the baptised church in that place. His Text was, "quench not the spirit;" here I remark, first, there was no such custom in the Churches; therefore, those persons who saw it  
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their duty, must form themselves into a distinct society. Second. These were young men; the elder were grown too formal and luke-warm, to attend to such exercises, or they were too proud and self-sufficient to unite with these young Christians, or they were too indifferent to the instruction of these young persons, to assist them, or they were too—too—too---something, I leave you to say what, for it is painful for me to point out the errors of good men. The first passage I recite, is page 25th. "The Spirit is quenched when those duties are neglected, that are adapted and appointed to feed and cherish this fire in the soul." Here follows his note; what the Apostle exhorts Timothy, respecting his extraordinary gift, viz. not to neglect, but stir it up. 1 *Ep.* iv. 14. and 2 *Ep.* i. 16. is applicable to all gifts and graces of the Spirit; for by not stirring them up in the use of the means, light grows dim, and love abates its fervency, believers themselves, shamefully leave, though they shall not utterly lose their first love, alluding to the metaphor in the text, agreeable to what has been observed in the explanation; when we are commanded not to quench the spirit, it implies an exhortation to stir him up, and by all appointed means to maintain his work upon us; page 26, a fire neglected, goes out, he, whose interest or duty it is to preserve it, if he does not use the means, is  
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as really, though not so heinously guilty, as he that pours water upon it; page 27. The Spirit is quenched, when gifts are neglected, or experience concealed; a fire often goes out when it is confined and kept too close. By this means it always deadens, and loses much of its heat and vigour. The whole of this and the next page is quite to my purpose, but I cannot recite it all; will content myself with only mentioning the note, page 28. (When gifts are not prayed for, not sought after, not cultivated, or when they are not encouraged and employed, it tends greatly to offend the Divine Spirit, and quench his work. And whether by *all symptoms* those desires and endeavours are not greatly wanting in the present time, I leave every observing Christian on reflection to judge.) Page 29. When this pious servant of Christ is cautioning persons against quenching the Spirit in themselves, he says, "gifts are lost for want of exercise, and if they remain, the end of their being bestowed is lost; for the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withall; and at the close of the page, he says, "such who keep silence" that is, who have received mercy, and are not ready to say with David, "come and hear all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he has done for my soul," are chargeable with the evil dehorted from in the text." Many persons will readily own this is the duty of such who  
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are coming into a Church ; but it seems as if it was to be laid aside after they are admitted, as a thing out of use. I will take one passage more from this excellent Sermon, (page 36.) The good man has been warning persons against taking up too much time in speaking from texts of scripture, and singing long hymns, so as to interfere with prayer and experimental conference ; lest any should mistake his meaning, he says, “ I speak not against young persons admonishing each other in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, when assembled together, but would rather promote that appointed and delightful means of grace ; nor would I discountenance an humble communication of the light offered to any person into any particular part of scripture, or debating some special points of doctrine, concerning which several may have doubts ; these things are profitable, when pursued with that modesty which becomes those who are newly enlightened.” It was to such he spoke, and let me add, if this was a fit exercise for young converts, why not for old Christians ? I believe the ministers themselves would find their account in it. It has been often said, the people’s prayers are the minister’s best books ; and I am persuaded their prayers, their experience, and their knowledge, communicated in this social way, would be of more real benefit to the pastors of Churches than all the books in their libraries, the Bible  
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only excepted. May the Lord help them to lay aside their prejudices and attend to ~~this~~ soul-nourishing and God-glorifying means of Grace. Amen!

*I remain, dear sir,*

*Your's, affectionately,*

*August 10,*

AARON WEST.

1797.

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DEAR SIR,

IT seems necessary for me to explain in two or three particulars, or it may be thought that I have a high opinion of my own spirituality. It is not so, for I feel the want of such exercises myself, and have taken up this subject upon conviction that it would be very beneficial to all. Again, it may be thought by some, that I am pushing for an active part in the church, this is not true; for I well know, if I were called upon to speak, it would make me tremble, notwithstanding the propriety of it might induce me to try. Again, it may be thought, because I have laid so much blame on the conduct of ministers, that I do not esteem them as I ought. This is not the case, I do not think that I come behind any of my Christian brethren in respect for the ministers of Christ. I esteem them next to  
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their Master; it may seem hard, that I should rank them altogether in this matter, —there is no doubt, but I have some personal allusions, and also some happy exceptions, but it would ill become me in this way, to point them out. I like them best, when they are faithful to me, and I claim the same privilege when speaking of them. If I have wounded any, it is not with the wound of an enemy. What I have said, by way of reproof, cannot hurt any man's mind, unless it apply to him. In this one view I pity those who are most distinguished for gifts, because it is so difficult to balance their minds and actions with a due proportion of humility. No temptation, perhaps, sticks closer to such than pride; it haunts them like a ghost, in every place, in every company, and in every work: and there are so many poisonous flatteries from weak people, to nurse it up, I would not be so much their enemy, as to add more fuel to this unhallowed fire.

FINIS.

